

Interview with Bill Lair

ISG-A-L-2009-014

Interview # 1: May 5, 2009

Interviewer: Mark DePue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

DePue: Today is May 5, 2009, it's a Tuesday. I'm in Mattoon, Illinois, with Bill Lair. This is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library; and before I do anything else, Bill; did I say it right—Mattoon?

Lair: Mattoon, very good.

DePue: Okay. I was corrected last time I was in town. Well, good afternoon, Bill.

Lair: Good afternoon.

DePue: We are here to talk about your experiences with Jim Edgar. Let's start by you telling us what your current position is.

Lair: I'm the managing editor of the *Mattoon Journal Gazette* and *Charleston Times-Courier* newspapers.

DePue: And how long have you been doing that?

Lair: I've been the managing editor of both papers for about twenty-five years, since maybe 1983 or '84.

DePue: So you've had a good run of it.

Lair: Yes, it has been. It's been very exciting, and part of it is because it's not very often that a governor is from a small community such as ours.

DePue: Tell us when and where you were born.

Lair: I was born August 14, 1948 in Peoria, Illinois.

DePue: Did you grow up there?

Lair: No, we lived there for a couple of years. My father was in school at Bradley University after World War II, and then when he graduated we moved to Ottawa, Illinois, when I was maybe two-years-old; and that's where I grew up.

DePue: I take it he was taking advantage of the GI Bill?

Lair: Yes, I think so. Yeah, he went in the Navy right out of high school in 1944 and was in about four years, and then when he got out, he went to Bradley.

DePue: So he wasn't one of those who went in during the war and then got out as soon as he could afterwards?

Lair: You know, I don't remember, because I think he graduated in '50. Maybe he didn't graduate until '52, because I have a younger sister and she also might have been born in Peoria. I'm trying to remember if she was born in Peoria or Ottawa. No, I think he was in the Navy for four years.

DePue: What did he do while you were growing up?

Lair: He was a salesman for a building supply company in Peoria named Wahfeld Manufacturing. They sold building supplies to lumber yards and contractors, and my dad was the sales representative for the Ottawa area, north-central Illinois.

DePue: I don't know that you told me your father's name, did you?

Lair: It's James, James Lair.

DePue: And your mother's name?

Lair: Margaret.

DePue: Did you spend all of your growing up years in Peoria?

Lair: In Ottawa.

DePue: In Ottawa?

Lair: Yeah, Ottawa. We moved there when I was, I think, two to four years old. I obviously don't remember, but when I was very little we moved to Ottawa, after my dad graduated from Bradley. And that's where I grew up and spent all of my time through high school, graduated high school in Ottawa.

DePue: When did you graduate from high school?

Lair: Graduated in 1966.

DePue: Those are those years now—we look back and it's kind of idealized in our minds. How would you describe your growing up years, your youth?

Lair: I would have to say it was very idyllic also. It was kind of a free time growing up, and it seemed like everything was geared towards young people, whether it was music or entertainment and activities, and... Yeah, it was a good time to grow up. And Ottawa was a good place.

DePue: And all about us baby boomers.

Lair: Yeah, we're a very self-centered generation, that's for sure.

DePue: You say you graduated from high school in 1966? What happened after that?

Lair: I enrolled at Eastern Illinois University in the fall of '66 and I was there for four years and graduated in 1970.

DePue: What did you major in?

Lair: My major was speech communications. I was interested in radio and television, and I was very active in the campus radio station. We didn't have a TV station at that time. So I was a speech major and a journalism minor. Eastern did not offer a journalism major at that time, so I minored in journalism.

DePue: Why Eastern?

Lair: Several reasons. I liked the size. It was only about six thousand students when I was at that age. I really thought I was going to be a major league baseball player, and they had a pitcher named Marty Pattin, who later played in the major leagues. In 1964, when I first started thinking about colleges, he led Eastern to the Small College World Series, and so I thought that would be a good place to go play baseball.¹ And it was far enough away from home. There were no interstate highways at that time down this way, and thought my parents wouldn't expect me home every weekend; it was a place to kind of get away without being too far away. So those are the three main reasons.

DePue: It was the classic reasoning of any kid at that age.

Lair: Yeah.

DePue: Let's talk about the classic experience of anybody who's in college in the late 1960s. When you mention that you were in TV and radio broadcasting, did you mention that you were doing radio shows at the...?

Lair: Yes, I was. I worked at the campus radio station.

¹ Marty Pattin had a successful twelve-year career in the major leagues, making his debut with the California Angels in 1968 and retiring as a Kansas City Royal in 1980, after a 1971 All-Star game appearance and stints in Seattle, Milwaukee, and Boston.
<http://www.baseball-reference.com/players/p/pattima01.shtml>

DePue: Call sign?

Lair: WELH, and it stood for Eastern Lincoln Hall because the radio station started in Lincoln Hall.

DePue: What was it like to be on a college campus like Eastern, and then be working on the college radio station at the height of the protest of the Vietnam War?

Lair: By the time the protest started, I was working for the campus newspaper and I was, I guess, a little bit like Dan Quayle in that I was interested in sports and parties and fraternities; and there wasn't a lot of protest at Eastern in the late 1960s. So it wasn't a big factor on Eastern's campus.

DePue: Was it a conservative campus in those days?

Lair: Yes, I would say it was a very conservative campus.

DePue: What caused Eastern to be more conservative than places like the U of I or Southern, where they had major protests against the war?²

Lair: You know, I'm not quite sure. I don't know if it's because of a smaller campus or if a lot of the students came from smaller towns at that time; if it was more of a regional university. I don't remember the particulars, I just remember it wasn't—I can remember one demonstration out in front of Old Main, the administration building, but it was very small and very orderly, maybe fifty students kind of marching in a circle. But I don't have a great recollection of it. And I know there were a couple of other things, but it was not a big presence on Eastern's campus.

DePue: Did Eastern have an ROTC program?³

Lair: No, not at that time. They do now, but not in the sixties.

DePue: Now that's one thing. In some campuses, at least, that was something to rally against.

Lair: Right.

² Several days after the Ohio National Guard killed four Kent State University students on May 4, 1970, both University of Illinois and Southern Illinois University students engaged in major protests that shut down their respective campuses. Robbie Lieberman and David Cochran, "'We Closed Down the Damn School': The Party Culture and Student Protest at Southern Illinois University During the Vietnam War Era," *Peace & Change* 26 (July 2001): 316-331. For protests at the University of Illinois campus, including the March 1970 firebombing of the ROTC lounge, see Patrick D. Kennedy, "Reactions Against the Vietnam War and Military-Related Targets on Campus: The University of Illinois as a Case Study, 1965-1972," *Illinois Historical Journal* 84:2 (1991): 101-118.

³ ROTC is an acronym for Reserve Officer Training Corps.

DePue: Your intentions, then, when you got close to graduating from college?

Lair: I had changed to a newspaper emphasis, a print journalism emphasis, by my junior year at Eastern, and so I was just looking for a newspaper position. Of course the draft was a factor in those days, and depending on your lottery number you may or may not have been drafted; and some jobs I know that I was not offered a position because of my draft number. But I did get a job and was not drafted, so I started working.

DePue: You weren't drafted because you had a high enough draft number?

Lair: My draft number, I believe, was 198, and I think the draft board in my county stopped at 195.

DePue: Wow.

Lair: So I went and took my physical and everything, but was not drafted.

DePue: How did you feel about not having to serve in the military?

Lair: I don't know. Sometimes I thought that it probably would have been good. And like I said, it wasn't because I had strong feelings one way or the other about it. It wasn't something on my horizon. We had an ROTC in high school, and I didn't enjoy that a whole lot; so it wasn't something that I pursued, because I didn't enjoy the experience that much in high school.

DePue: Where did you find employment out of college?

Lair: In Rock Island, Illinois, at the *Argus* newspaper. The name of the newspaper is the *Argus*, and I was a news reporter and enjoyed that. I did that for a year; then I left and went to teach speech and journalism at Carl Sandburg High School in Orland Park, and decided that wasn't for me. There was another opening back at the *Argus*; they asked me if I wanted to come back, and I decided that I wanted to get back into the newspaper business. So I went back to Rock Island, and then in 1973—I had worked at the Charleston newspaper when I was in college, and they had an opening for a sports editor and asked if I wanted to come there as sports editor; and that's what I did.

DePue: Had you always been working on the sports side of journalism before that time?

Lair: No. In Rock Island, it was news. I was a general assignment news reporter. I mean, I had a few beats—but a news reporter.

DePue: I think we're at the time of your life, now, where you had your first encounter with Jim Edgar. Tell us how that came about.

Lair: I don't remember specifically. When I first met him he was not in political office. I believe he was selling insurance, and he and Brenda were just another young couple

with children, like anybody else that we had met at that time. Just seemed like a nice young man and a nice couple, and we ended up at the same church.

DePue: We should probably go back and establish that you got married somewhere in the process.

Lair: Yes. My wife also was a student at Eastern. We got married in November of our senior year in college, 1969; it will be forty years this winter.

DePue: What's her name?

Lair: Her name is Cheryl, with a C.

DePue: And last name?

Lair: Her name was Weber.

DePue: Two Bs?

Lair: No, just one. And she's from Pana. And that's one reason why we came here, because she wanted to be closer to her family when we were in the Quad Cities.

DePue: A little bit more about the first few experiences you had with the Edgars, then.

Lair: I think it was primarily in Sunday school and church. I know the Edgars are Baptist, but at that time they attended Wesley United Methodist Church in Charleston, and they were members of a Sunday school class called the Parables Sunday School class. My wife and I started attending the church, and started going to that Sunday school class, and that's how we met them. And the class, because it was young adults, would have a social event once a month with families; so that's how we got to know the Edgars.

DePue: Did you have children about the same age as the Edgar children?

Lair: Mine are younger. In '73, we just had one child; our oldest son was born in '72. And I know that the Edgars' are a few years older than that.

DePue: Did you socialize outside the church setting with them?

Lair: I don't think so. I think it was in the context of our Sunday school class having some kind of a party; maybe a cookout or bowling or some family activity or something where you could bring the kids, because a lot of us would have needed baby sitters at that time. It was very low key social events.

DePue: Before he first ran for office, which was 1974, what were your impressions of Jim and Brenda?

Lair: I knew that he had been student body president at Eastern because we were in college at Eastern at that time, during part of the same time that Jim and Brenda

were at school. But I didn't really know him. I just remember him as being someone from Charleston and who I knew was interested in politics, but he didn't talk about that all the time. I think at that time, we were all young and trying to get established in our careers or our businesses, dealing with family situations, and he just seemed like anybody else at that point.

DePue: Any impressions from sitting in the same Sunday school class as the two of them? You're smiling.

Lair: I'm just smiling because I think they both had a very strong background in the church and a good knowledge of the Bible and Christianity. Another thing that I admired about both of them is that they weren't hesitant about expressing their beliefs and convictions in that kind of a setting. It wasn't like going out on the street corner, but in that kind of a group—and there were probably fifteen or twenty of us in the class; it was kind of self-taught. People took turns teaching. And I don't remember if Jim or Brenda actually led a lesson, but I do remember people expressing their views on Christianity or religion.

DePue: Were they any more or less likely to participate and express their views?

Lair: No, I don't think so. My recollection at that time is they were just another young couple like everybody else, whether the other people in there were faculty at Eastern or sales representatives or anything like that.

DePue: What was your thought, then, when you heard that he was going to run for the state legislature in '74?

Lair: I have to be honest that I didn't pay that much attention to the local politics because I didn't think we would stay in Charleston more than a couple years. So when he said he was going to run I thought that was nice, but I didn't particularly see him as someday having a statewide office or that he was a favorite or anything like that. He just seemed like somebody who just decided to do that. I knew he wasn't real happy selling insurance, and the more I got to know him, the more I realized that he wanted to do something political, but I didn't necessarily know that it meant running for office.

DePue: You mentioned right before we started that your wife was involved with his campaign?

Lair: Yes.

DePue: How did that happen?

Lair: Again, I think just through Sunday school. They didn't have a lot of money to pay [campaign] staff, so a lot of the people who worked for him in the office were people from the Sunday school class; friends, and I think my wife, stuffed envelopes, and helped send out mailings and things like that. His brother Fred's father-in-law at that time owned a travel agency on the east side of the Charleston

square, and he let Jim use a couple rooms upstairs above the travel agency for his office, so that's where they did all the work. And again, I can't imagine that he charged Jim for that room. It was a very low key and no frills kind of an operation.

DePue: In what way was Cheryl working on the campaign?

Lair: She didn't travel or anything; she just worked there in the office, probably answering phones, doing mailings, maybe helping with the schedule and things like that. It was just a part-time thing that I think several women at the Sunday school class did.

DePue: I notice you didn't say job. I assume she was not paid.

Lair: She was not paid, no. I don't know that anyone was paid at that time, no.

DePue: Did you know his opponent? I mean, his main opponent was Max Coffey, who I think at the time was a florist in Charleston.

Lair: Yeah, that's right.

DePue: And not a big town. Did you know him?

Lair: I didn't know Max until later, and again, he was in the same Sunday school class. But I got to know him later more through the politics. I didn't know him at that time. And that was the cumulative voting where three people from the district would be elected; two from one party and one from the other party. So Jim was third of the Republicans of that time, because I'm sure there were two Republicans who were elected, and he was not elected.

DePue: What was your impression of the campaign that he ran in 1974?

Lair: I don't remember a whole lot about it. But I just felt like he was maybe too young, people didn't know him outside of the area. In '74 he would have been late twenties, I guess, twenty-seven, twenty-eight years old, and I think a lot of people didn't know him. And there were a lot of Coffeys around the Charleston area, and Max, I think, had been a township official and maybe even on the county board; I'm not positive. But I think he was a little more established politically. I don't remember the other candidates at that time. But I think Jim just didn't have the recognition of a lot of people. I think being student body president at Eastern did not travel beyond a certain area of Charleston.

DePue: How would you describe his personality and his campaigning style at that time?

Lair: I don't know that I saw Jim campaign very much, but he was a pretty shy person, I would say; fairly withdrawn in large crowds. He didn't come off as real assertive or real...confident, I guess would be the word, to where other people could see that. He was just a little withdrawn, I think, as a younger man.

DePue: Could he give a good speech?

Lair: I don't remember at that time. Later on, he did. But I think Jim's verbal skills needed a lot of work, just from listening to him speak through the years. And he did get a lot better at that. But as a young man, I think that might have been a weakness that people might have pointed to.

DePue: I asked you before about personality. How about his character? What would you say about his character?

Lair: I got to know his character from Sunday school class, from hearing him talk about issues. I was very impressed, as a young man who had been to college in the sixties, that he did not drink. He didn't make an issue of that with other people, but it just wasn't something that he was interested in doing.

DePue: Was that one of the things that was preached from the pulpit at this church?

Lair: No, I would say Wesley is not a fire and brimstone type of preaching. It's just the way he was, and I think people respected that because again, in the late sixties—and this was the early seventies—there was a lot of alcohol and other things that people used.

DePue: Heck, Bill, this is the age of flower children.

Lair: (laughs) Yep, yep, even in conservative Charleston.

DePue: How about his politics? How would you describe his politics?

Lair: Are we talking about the early seventies again?

DePue: We're talking about the early seventies.

Lair: I'd have to say that I don't remember. I don't know that I could say what his politics were until later.

DePue: Okay.

Lair: Again, I was sports editor. I knew him more as a social kind of thing.

DePue: With brother Fred's interest in sports, you might have had more in common with Fred.

Lair: Yeah, I've known Fred too, and you're right. But Jim's interested in sports, it's just that wasn't the dominant thing.

DePue: I'll put you on the spot. How did you vote in '74?

Lair: I'm sure I voted for him because I knew him personally and didn't know the other people, and my wife helped out with his campaign. And of course you're not going

to find many people in Charleston today who would say that they didn't vote for Jim Edgar. If everybody who said they voted for Jim had voted for him, he probably would have won. But everybody today would say they've always voted for Jim Edgar.

DePue: Do you have any impression—you weren't all that close with him, but maybe your wife was closer—how he took that loss in '74?

Lair: I think he took it very hard, and I think he was very worried about his future, about his political future. I know he didn't want to keep selling insurance, but I think he kind of struggled with what the future was going to bring and whether or not he was going to be able to make another run and be successful. I think he was very concerned about it.

DePue: I think it must have been shortly after this that he took an opportunity and went off to Colorado to work with the National Conference of State Legislatures. Is that how you recall things?

Lair: I don't remember. That means he must have left and come back, and I don't recall that.

DePue: He did run for office again in 1976, of course, and had the advantage that Max Coffey had decided to run for the Illinois Senate, which he did successfully and opened up an opportunity for Jim. Were you involved, was your wife involved with that '76 campaign?

Lair: No, and we always joke that that's why he won, because the only campaign she worked on he lost, and she was not asked to come back. So maybe there was a reason for that. No, she did not work the next time. They were still in the Sunday school class, and so we still knew him. And it was at that election when I said he went to a football game with me as my photographer.

DePue: How did that happen?

Lair: I don't remember how it happened. We're a morning paper, and in those days before email and being able to electronically send things, there was no way we could take a picture at an out-of-town game and get it back to the newspaper to use that night. But we had two passes to the game. He was running for state rep again at that time; it must have been late October right before the election. And somehow I asked him, or he had said he was interested in going to the game, and I told him that I had an extra pass as a photographer because I was going to cover the game as the sports editor. So he went as my photographer, and I had a camera and a camera bag, and he took that and somewhere—if they have records at Roxana High School, they would have Jim Edgar signed in as a photographer for the *Charleston Times-Courier* for that playoff football game in 1976.

DePue: Did any of his pictures make the paper?

Lair: He never took a picture. He gave me the camera bag back after we got into the football field, and I never saw him again until the game was over. I think he was out campaigning with all the Charleston people who went to the game. And it must have worked, because he got elected a week or two later, whenever the election was.

DePue: This might be a little bit unfair coming from your perspective, but do you think he ran a more effective campaign in 1976? Or what was different about it?

Lair: Yeah, I don't know. I don't know if it was the fact that Max Coffey had moved on and that maybe some of his supporters and some of his influence might have gone to help Jim. I honestly don't remember. Again, I was so engrossed in the sports part; and my association with Jim was more personal because of Sunday school, and that kind of a relationship.

DePue: You gave the impression that you've known Max later in your life, and I'm sure you've talked to Max about Governor Edgar. Was Senator Coffey inclined to throw his support towards Jim Edgar?

Lair: I think he was, because Max Coffey was very involved in politics. He's been a precinct committeeman, the Coles County Republican Party chairman, so I think if a Republican candidate—and Jim was a couple years more mature, and maybe other people in the party got to know him a little better and things like that. Yeah, I think Max and Jim have had a good relationship through the years.

DePue: From 1976 on, he served in a variety of different positions, at least until he retired from being governor in 1998. In a general sense—and then I'll go back and be a little bit more specific—how closely did you follow his career and stay in touch with Jim?

Lair: The only way that I was in touch with him is that he was good about staying in touch with Charleston. So whenever he would come back when he was secretary of state, or even when he was state representative—and I'm trying to remember. Eastern's football team won the small college [NCAADivision II] national championship in 1978, and Governor Thompson had a dinner at the executive mansion for the football team, and Jim Edgar was there. So I'm trying to remember if, at that point, he had already resigned as state rep and was the legislative liaison.

DePue: That happened in early '79.

Lair: Yeah, so this would have been maybe December of '78 that the dinner was held, or maybe even January of '79. But Jim Edgar was there, and my wife and I sat at the same table with them at that dinner. Whenever he would come back to Charleston from Springfield, he always knew people; he always treated you like you'd just seen each other the previous week. But that's kind of the extent of it. I would say it was more him recognizing people when he would come back, or try to make the effort to be friendly.

DePue: Did Brenda usually come with him when he made those visits?

Lair: Yes. Brenda almost always came with him, and she was always very friendly, very warm. Hugged you and hugged my wife more as old friends, not as a newspaper person; as people who had kids close to the same age, who had been in Sunday school together, who had done social things together. That kind of thing.

DePue: His brother Fred talked about a situation when Jim accepted, from Governor Thompson, the opportunity to become the legislative liaison. Fred described that as a pretty big, important step, and that Jim at that time was concerned about cutting his ties from Charleston and giving the impression that he was abandoning his constituents back in Charleston. So Fred described an event where Governor Thompson could come to Charleston and talk to the people of the community about why this was happening and why this was a good thing. Do you recall that incident?

Lair: I recall the incident. I don't recall Thompson being there. I recall Jim Edgar being there. And I know Thompson was there, but I guess maybe I was more focused on Jim Edgar than Jim Thompson. But I am aware that Jim Thompson was there and I'm aware that he did a little sales pitch to the people here. From my standpoint I saw it as a great opportunity for Jim Edgar. I didn't have that feeling. I understand Jim Edgar had that feeling, but I never felt that way about it.

DePue: What do you think it says about Edgar that he felt he needed to do that?

Lair: I think it says that he was so tied and connected to Charleston and this area, that he didn't want to let people down. As you said, he thought he might have been abandoning people, and I think people in Charleston were so supportive of him all the time that he didn't want to feel like he might be letting people down. But I think people were so proud and happy for him that I never got that sense from anybody that they thought he had taken their votes and then skipped office.

DePue: It was 1981, a couple years later, that he gets a new opportunity when Alan Dixon goes to the U.S. Senate, then Governor Thompson selects Edgar as the secretary of state. Were you and other people back in his hometown surprised by that move?

Lair: It's hard to look back and think if you were surprised because he was elected governor twice, and now you think, Well, of course that was logical. But—

DePue: He was only thirty-four at the time.

Lair: Yeah, he was very young at the time, and I think the feeling was that Jim Thompson saw something in him to make him the legislative liaison, and that Thompson saw him maybe as a rising star, or that the Republican Party did; and I think people here, again, were proud of that. And I don't know that surprised is the right word. I guess you're always surprised in Illinois when someone from downstate is seen as a viable statewide office holder, even back then. I mean, today it's even more so, but even back then I think that was a little bit of a surprise; although Alan Dixon was

downstate, but more from the Metro-East area.⁴ I don't know that surprise—but just saw it as a huge opportunity for him. And I guess, like you said, at that age, wondering, Is this too much for him? Can he do this?

DePue: You weren't thinking, Here's a rising star, the sky's the limit?

Lair: Yeah, I think so. Once he was appointed, I think a lot of people thought, Yeah, he's got a good shot at going somewhere else. Whether it would be governor, senator, something like that, I think people started to think. But if that was 1980 or '81, and five years before he had just been elected as a state representative from east-central Illinois, that was quite a leap.

DePue: 1982 he runs for the first time as the secretary of state candidate. He runs again in 1986, so he has quite a long run as secretary of state. Anything in those years that struck you or you remember today, looking back at it?

Lair: There were two things I can remember that I think made big impressions, and one of them even more in hindsight. But one was he really championed toughening the DUI laws, the drunk driving laws. I believe they raised the blood alcohol content and stiffened the penalty some while he was secretary of state.

DePue: Yeah, it went from 1.0 to 0.8. [The Illinois legislature did pass a stronger drunk-driving law backed by Edgar in spring 1981, which increased penalties for refusing a breathalyzer test and eliminated an offender's option for a second breath test. However, despite several attempts over the years, the legislature did not pass a law lowering the blood-alcohol standard from .1 to .08 until May 7, 1997.⁵]

Lair: Yeah. So I think that was part of it. The other thing that I remember—and it didn't make that big of an issue with me at the time, except thinking that this is the kind of person he is—he fired a bunch of people who supposedly took some bribes for drivers' licenses. And what strikes you now is that happened again, apparently, a few years later with another secretary of state. But he did fire a bunch of people. At the time I thought, I think he's a very moral person, a very ethical person, and that just fits my perception of him. And then later, when there were problems in that office again, it reinforced that he tried to do something about that when he was there.

DePue: You'd had a lot of years on the sports side of journalism. When did you switch over to a different position?

Lair: I switched in 1980, and I did news and sports for a year or two. The managing editor of the Charleston paper left in 1981 and I became the managing editor. The Mattoon and Charleston papers were owned by the same company, but Mattoon was an afternoon paper and Charleston was a morning paper. Then in the fall of '82,

⁴ Metro-East is the region composed of the suburbs lying east of St. Louis, in Illinois.

⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 1997, 1.

Mattoon also became a morning paper and so the two staffs became one office. Probably sometime in 1983, I became managing editor of both papers.

DePue: Did that give you a better opportunity to follow politics and to follow his career in particular?

Lair: We still had reporters that did some of that, and we're pretty local. We followed more of the elections themselves than some of his time in office, some of the day-to-day. So it probably wasn't until he ran for governor that I really became more observant or that we covered a lot more of him as a candidate and as a politician.

DePue: At least when you started, it seems that there were two—correct me if I'm wrong—different entities in terms of the Mattoon paper and the Charleston paper. Did they both have a similar editorial stance on politics?

Lair: I think so. He [Edgar] was seen more as a Coles County person, so it wasn't like Mattoon didn't see him. I think in 1989 we had a Jim Edgar Day and it was a Coles County Day; in fact, it was held out at the airport, so it wasn't in Charleston or in Mattoon, trying to make it more of a county-wide thing.

DePue: Nineteen eighty-nine gets us up to about the time he's thinking seriously—I can't recall exactly when he actually declared that he was going to run, but it wasn't too long after if it wasn't already by that time. Your thoughts when you heard that he was going to declare to run for governor?

Lair: Once Jim Thompson said that he was not going to seek reelection, of course everybody here thought Jim Edgar would be a logical candidate for the Republicans because he had been elected twice as secretary of state after being appointed. I believe that he won by the biggest margin of any of the statewide office holders the second time that he ran for secretary of state.⁶

DePue: That was the year that a Lyndon LaRouche candidate was on the ticket as the Democrat, and so there was interesting politics that year.

Lair: Yes, I do remember that. The LaRouche candidate, some of that was because of the difficult names on the main Democratic ballot, and Jim Edgar is a pretty simple name. You can't get much more simple than that. So yeah, I think people thought that he was a good candidate for governor. There was a lot of thought at that time that George Ryan maybe was going to be the candidate because he was lieutenant governor under Thompson. But Edgar seemed to be so popular as secretary of state that he just seemed like, to me, the more logical candidate to take over from Thompson.

DePue: And not just because he was from Coles County and you went to Sunday school with him?

⁶ Track down Edgar's victory margins.

Lair: Yeah, I'm sure that played a big factor. And I can't hide that, that connection and knowing him personally. You know, not a whole lot of us get to know a statewide candidate on a personal basis, so the people from here that did, I think, were very supportive.

DePue: This might again be an unfair question, because just as you said, he is a statewide candidate. But did you see an evolution in his campaigning style and his confidence from that first election in '74 to 1990?

Lair: He was much more comfortable with the media, because I got to see him during the campaign with Chicago media, the Springfield media. He was much more confident. His voice was, I want to say, a little more deep and assertive. Some people think that this area, we have a little bit of a downstate accent, and I think he lost some of that as secretary of state and during the campaign. So I think he was much more assertive, and I think his vocal presence was much, much improved.

DePue: What was the local impression, downstate impression, of Neil Hartigan, his opponent?

Lair: There's always a downstate-Chicago conflict, and a lot of people saw him, I think, as a Chicago politician. He was attorney general; it's not that he was unpopular. And he had supporters. But here, it was more the opportunity to elect a downstate politician. And I don't know, it's not my statistic, but when Jim Edgar was elected governor, he was the first governor south of Interstate 80 in, like, sixty years or sixty-five years or something like that. So it was quite a change. Stratton was from right close to what is now Interstate 80, but he [Edgar] was truly the first—what those of us downstate consider to be downstate—in sixty-five years. So I think we saw it as a chance to elect somebody that we knew his values and the kind of person that he was; and there was a lot of that for people in the Coles County area.

DePue: That was a very close election, and it went well into the night before anybody knew who the actual victor was. What was the mood those few days right before the election, when everybody knew the polls were saying it was very close?

Lair: I think people here really thought he was going to win. There may have been a little surprise; maybe we were a little naïve with the Chicago area, just the amount of people. But I think people here thought he was going to win; in fact, I didn't know until I was in Chicago at Jim Edgar's hotel on election night and talked with him sometime very late in the evening. It was before Neil Hartigan called and said that he was conceding, and Jim said he thought up until two or three days before the election that he was going to lose. He was pretty prepared for that.

But he said early in the evening as the returns came in, he felt good. And he told me at that time, at maybe midnight, that he had won. Of course, nobody had said, "Jim Edgar's the winner." Neil Hartigan hadn't conceded. But he knew it was over at that time. I remember him being so excited in his hotel room. I mean, this was just in his hotel room. He had people in other rooms that were getting all the

returns and all that. He was excited. I don't know when I've seen him so excited and happy and just kind of bouncy, but he knew it was over. But it wasn't until, like, 1:30 in the morning that Neil Hartigan called him. So he knew, but he couldn't go out and see everybody and say it's over.

DePue: Anything else about that particular race that sticks with you today?

Lair: The other thing is again, from what he said—because I thought the campaign got pretty nasty. Of course, my bias from supporting Jim Edgar is that I thought Neil Hartigan took some cheap shots at him. And I remember asking Jim Edgar about that, and Jim said, “Oh, that’s just part of the campaign.” He said, “Neil and I are good friends, and it doesn’t mean anything. That’s just what you do in campaigns.” So it rolled off of him.

DePue: Well, if Hartigan starts playing hardball, did Edgar reciprocate?

Lair: I don't remember, to be honest. It's been too long ago. I don't remember exactly what Jim Edgar did. But Jim Edgar's a politician. He's not immune to playing politics, and so I may not remember it, but I wouldn't be surprised that he took some swings at Hartigan too.

DePue: Would you describe him—once he got to the governorship and his time as secretary of state—as more principled or more pragmatic?

Lair: Hmm. I don't know that he was more principled, so I would say he was more pragmatic. I think he governed—one of the criticisms of him by some people is that he was a manager, not a leader. But I think managing is what he did and managing is not such a bad thing. At that time, we had some financial problems in the state. Not as severe as they are today, but there were some financial problems.

DePue: More severe than they'd ever had before, so it's all a matter of perspective, I guess.

Lair: Yeah. And I think he managed. I think he combined a couple of agencies. He had campaigned saying that we needed to make the income tax surcharge permanent, which could cause problems for any candidate. But he was quite open about that. And I remember that there was a big tug of war between him and Mike Madigan early on. I can't remember all the specifics about it, but I do remember there was quite a tug of war and that Jim Edgar ended up winning that tug of war; and I think that kind of established that he really was the governor and that all the power was not with the Speaker of the House.

DePue: I think you might be referring to that first budget battle where it went well into July and there actually was a state payroll that was missed before they finally reached some agreement.

Lair: Yes.

DePue: Any other impressions of his years as governor? Let me ask you first as the managing editor of a local but important newspaper, and then as a friend; and maybe there's no difference.

Lair: Is there a difference between being a managing editor and a friend?

DePue: Your impressions of his job as governor, as a managing editor of a paper.

Lair: As the managing editor of the paper, I feel like one of the major goals that he had that he was not successful at was reforming education funding. I think that was something that he had said he was interested in doing. He eventually formed a Blue Ribbon Commission, but they didn't get that done. And that's a disappointment, I think. I'm not saying that he was a bad governor because he didn't get that done; I'm just saying that's something that I remember about those years that didn't happen.

But as a friend, I think the thing that I feel really good about is that he always conducted himself with dignity; that he represented this area well. People are proud of him. People still think highly of him. I know that his statewide approval rating was well over 60 percent, and that he went out of office on a very high level of support. I just feel like he really dignified the office, and that people thought highly of the state's executive while he was governor; and I feel really good about that as a friend and as a Charleston and Coles County resident.

DePue: Do you think the MSI scandal that was percolating pretty strongly in 1997, primarily in 1997 and '98, hurt his image?

Lair: I'm sure it hurt with some people, but there was never any real connection that he had done anything. And obviously from the approval rating when he went out of office, I don't want to say it's like Ronald Reagan being the Teflon president, but it was tough to see Jim Edgar's close involvement in anything like that. I mean, there were maybe people in his administration that may have had some connections, and so you say ultimately he's responsible. But I don't think there was ever anything that tied him directly to it. And I think if there had been, people wouldn't still think so well of him.

DePue: Why do you think that his image wasn't hurt? What was it about Jim Edgar that kind of protected him from those suspicions?

Lair: I think all the things that he did as secretary of state and through the early years of being the governor; that people felt like he handled the office, again, with dignity and did what was in the best interest of the state. So I think people just had a hard time believing that he was involved in anything unethical.

DePue: Let's get up to 1998 and that decision of whether or not he's going to run for office. Before he declares if he's going to run for governor again or run for another public office, what was your thought on the issue and what was the tone of those in Coles County?

Lair: I think my thought was that he was not going to run for governor again. I thought that at some point he would run for another office. And I think that the tone was that he's too young to stop serving in political office. In 1998, he'd have been maybe fifty-two, so I think people felt like he still had a lot of years ahead that he could serve if he wanted to.

DePue: Did he have the ambition, did they think?

Lair: I don't think so. I think Jim Edgar's ambition was to be governor of Illinois, and I think he would have a hard time—I don't mean as a negative way, but I don't think anything else would compare to being governor. President, maybe, but...

DePue: U.S. Senate?

Lair: I don't think the U.S. Senate would. He'd be one of a hundred people, and it might be prestigious, something to put on a resume or for your family history, but I don't think that—

DePue: Or your tombstone.

Lair: Yeah, or your tombstone.⁷ (laughs) But I think being governor is what he really wanted to do. When he did that, I just don't think he had a lot of drive to do something else. I think he was probably more tempted to run for governor again a couple years ago—

DePue: 2006.

Lair: —than to run for Senate.

DePue: And what would Coles County say in 2006 about him running again?

Lair: Running again for governor?

DePue: Yeah.

Lair: I think the Republicans would have said, "This is what we need. We need to bring integrity back; we need to restore the image of the Republicans in Illinois, and Jim Edgar's the best person to do that."

DePue: I'm going to end with some general questions, but let me ask you this. You have Jim Edgar, and then the heir apparent and the person who actually won the election the next time around is George Ryan. Your thoughts of the George Ryan administration, especially in comparison to what Jim Edgar had accomplished?

⁷ The joke in this instance refers to the crypt maintained by U.S. Sen. Roland Burris, which attracted a considerable amount of press coverage following his appointment to Barack Obama's vacant seat in the Senate by Governor Blagojevich. For one example, see *Chicago Tribune*, January 16, 2009, 2.

Lair: I think it took a lot away from what Jim Edgar accomplished. I think we lost a lot of faith in the state executive and the state government. I just feel like things almost went 180 degrees the other direction. And it was as much from what he did as secretary of state, but also in the governor's office—

DePue: What George Ryan did?

Lair: Yes, with George Ryan, I'm sorry—what he did in the secretary of state's office that we found out during that first campaign. But I think also the big building program that he [Ryan] launched—and I know some people say, Well, we didn't do that much under Edgar, but there were some building projects; but not on the scale of what George Ryan did. And I think we just kept building on this spending venue in state government; I think it's taken a lot away from what Jim Edgar accomplished.

DePue: So it wasn't just the ethical problems that George Ryan had, but it was some fiscal irresponsibility; if I can put some words in your mouth perhaps?

Lair: Irresponsibility might not be exactly accurate, but it's trying to please various constituents and not being a leader of the whole state. I think he was a leader of part of it.

DePue: I suppose since I went to George Ryan, I ought to ask you about your impressions of the Rod Blagojevich years. Or is it too early to ask a managing editor that question?

Lair: My thoughts of Rod Blagojevich are that we have slid even further away from what I feel was a very ethical time period under Jim Edgar; that spending and the pay to play, the influence part of it, has taken away from where we were ten years ago or eleven years ago.

DePue: Last couple questions, then. What do you think the Edgar Administration—and you can include both secretary of state and governor if you want here—what was the accomplishments for which you, and maybe Coles County, is most proud of?

Lair: The thing I'm most proud of is, like I said, that he served with dignity and with an ethical aura; that he told voters in 1990 that the state was in financial trouble, we needed to make the surcharge permanent; that he did what he said he was going to do; and that even as secretary of state he brought about some reforms with drunk driving that made things safer for the people of Illinois. I just think he conducted both offices with dignity and responsibility.

DePue: How about disappointment, the biggest disappointment?

Lair: I guess the school funding, again, is the biggest disappointment. I don't think that's entirely his fault, but I think it was just one of those things. I think there are a lot of people that wish we could have a different way to fund schools. And probably the second disappointment is that he stepped down so young; that at fifty-two, he was

done. Rod Blagojevich, I think, is fifty-two. I might be wrong, but it's something like that. And there are two entirely different feelings about how many more years one can serve.

DePue: You willing to suggest that Rod Blagojevich is also done?

Lair: (laughs) I can suggest that, yes. I think so.

DePue: How about an overall assessment of the Edgar years?

Lair: I think it was solid management. Taking Illinois in a financially difficult time and making some changes in how things were done, and combining a couple of agencies and restraining some of the spending; I just think he managed it well, while maintaining that small town relationship.

DePue: The character trait, then, that stands out most in your mind that would define who Jim Edgar is?

Lair: I would say he was honest and ethical. That's how I see him.

DePue: Bill, this has been a lot of fun and insightful and worthwhile for me. I hope you enjoyed it. Any final comments for us?

Lair: I've always been amazed at his returning to his roots or remembering his roots, and I think that's special for people here that he—he easily could have left Charleston behind even as secretary of state, but he maintained his voting privileges here until the second time he ran for governor. He voted here as secretary of state and the first time he ran for governor. He voted in Charleston, not in Springfield. And I think that meant a lot to people here too.

DePue: Okay, thank you very much, Bill.

Lair: Thank you.

(break in recording)

DePue: This is Mark DePue. I am back with Bill Lair, and as soon as we were done with the interview, as sometimes happens, Bill told me a wonderful experience that we just have to get on the record here officially. Can you start from there?

Lair: Sure. One of my special memories about Jim Edgar was when he ran for governor in 1990, and it was election night and his headquarters were in a hotel in Chicago. I was there, and one thing that's always kind of special to me is that he sent one of his press people to come get me about midnight, to come to his room and talk to him so that we could get a story in the paper the next morning. And he didn't have to do that. He was in Chicago. There were lots of Chicago newspaper and TV people there, but he had somebody come get me and call me in there. And then the next morning, he said he would go out to breakfast with me, and so he said to meet

him at one of the Chicago TV stations. So I was there. It was real early in the morning. I think it was like 6:30, and of course the election wasn't known until almost two in the morning.

So I was sitting in the lobby at this TV station, and pretty soon the new Governor Edgar and his entourage swept in the lobby of the TV station, got on the elevator, and went up to whatever floor the studio was on. And I just sat there and thought, Okay, when they get done, on the way out, I'll make sure that he sees me and we'll go to breakfast. And about two minutes later, Gary Mack, who was one of his press secretaries, got off the elevator and said, "Jim said he'd like for you to come upstairs too." I went upstairs and was there while he did the interviews with the people there. I think it was Channel 2 in Chicago.

He just always had this connection, or wanted that connection, with Charleston, and I'm sure he wanted the people in Charleston to have a special story that wasn't just from the Associated Press or United Press International. He wanted the local reporter, the local writer, to have that also. And those were just special things that I remember from that time.

DePue: Were you able to write a story from that experience that reflected that incident?

Lair: I wrote a column about that incident and another one when we went out for breakfast. I don't remember the name of the restaurant, but I went with Jim and maybe two other people. I think there were four of us. We went to this restaurant, and it was packed for breakfast, and one of Jim's aides went in and told the restaurant manager we wanted four for breakfast. There were people standing and waiting to be served, and the manager, of course, told us to come on in; he had a table for us. And Jim said, "No, I'm not going to do that. We'll wait," and we stood there and waited until the other people ahead of us got served and there was a table.

DePue: I'd love to overhear the conversation that was going on among the people who were waiting to sit down.

Lair: Well, being the politician he is, he went around and shook hands and introduced himself to all the people there in the restaurant. So he took advantage of the time. The rest of us stood there and waited, but he played the crowd.

DePue: I would imagine that the crowd ate it up.

Lair: Yes, they did. Yep, he got a big round of applause from people in there, and I'm sure they were very aware that he waited until other people got served.

DePue: Any other incidents or experiences that were especially important to you that you'd like to mention here?

Lair: I think those were the main ones, yeah. Those are things that I will always remember.

DePue: It was definitely worth going back and recording a few more minutes.

Lair: Good, good.

DePue: Thank you, Bill.

Lair: Yep, thank you.

(end of interview)